



CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN  
LA SYNAGOGUE DE DELME

## SALON INTERNATIONAL DE LA PEINTURE DE DELME Exhibition from February 8<sup>th</sup> to June 8<sup>th</sup> 2025

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*I'll be back !'*

Welcome to the *Salon International de la peinture de Delme*, an exhibition of paintings selected from the work of artists who are passionate and concerned about painting today, at a time when this artistic activity, and its supposed “return” over the past decade, has recently been the subject of numerous institutional shows<sup>2</sup>. This exhibition is not intended to be thematic, which is understandable given the disparate styles and approaches of the artists on show: some of the paintings presented follow rigorous figurative representation techniques, while others are rather abstract, sometimes veering towards psychedelic forms. Others make use of technology, either in the way they are produced, or because it becomes their subject. Finally, some take a critical look at current economic regimes, convey a socio-political message or question the historicity of pictorial art.

This eclectic presentation is nonetheless inspired by the format of painting Salons, both those of local amateur artists' associations, with their well-known (and sometimes very inspiring) types of hanging and flexibility in the choice of works, and also the more historic ones of independent artists' associations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as the first Impressionist salon in Nadar's studio, which celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2024<sup>3</sup>. It is the occasion here to pay tribute to all the energy and dynamism expended by artists throughout

1 *Terminator*, James Cameron, 1984.

2 Examples of recent painting exhibitions include: *Les Apparences*, CAC – À cent mètres du monde, Perpignan (2021); *Immortelle*, MOCO, Montpellier (2023); *Voir en peinture, La jeune figuration en France*, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain des Sables-d'Olonne (2023); *Between pixel and pigment. Hybrid painting in post-digital times*, Marta Herford and Kunsthalle Bielefeld (2024); *Le jour des peintres. 80 peintres contemporains de la scène française à la rencontre des visiteurs*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (2024); *The Living End: Painting and Other Technologies, 1970–2020*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2024); and *Ordinary People: Photorealism and the Work of Art since 1968*, MOCA, Los Angeles (2024).

3 See the exhibition *Paris 1874. Inventer l'impressionnisme*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (2024).

the ages to present their work to the public, often by their own efforts, when the passage through institutional structures is not, for different reasons depending on the era, easy or immediate. We note that many of the artists gathered here did not directly turn to institutions to present their paintings. Rather, they began by taking advantage of a parallel circuit of self-managed venues – “artist run-spaces” – through invitations from other artists or independent curators to “project spaces” and other improvised venues, only identified by their peers and with few means of communication. The *Salon International de la peinture de Delme* is presented as a collective exhibition in the vein of these different types of Salons, with no theme other than showing paintings, while paying tribute to all those artists who have had the courage to create the conditions for their works to be shown.

Although painting is still the medium of reference when it comes to art, its legitimacy as a relevant practice at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the subject of much debate. Among the grievances attributed to it are its rejection by the twentieth-century avant-gardes<sup>4</sup>, still very much alive today; its proximity to the art market, with painting remaining the medium most conducive to speculation; a “bourgeois” art form to which it would be difficult to relate in order to be a credible artist, especially today, when being a useful artist for society is more appropriate than ever to artistic endeavors than making art for art’s sake, or reacting to art with art. Moreover, painting would be the least progressive form of art, since it would be difficult to renew it in one direction or another, in a world where everything has already been done, and would condemn itself to eternal reproduction of pictorial languages that are already outdated (critique of “like art”<sup>5</sup>), through morbid retrograde phenomena (“zombie painting”, “zombie figuration”<sup>6</sup>). Painting would thus be dead, firstly because modernity would have formally reduced it to its term, and secondly because it would be incapable of adapting to a socially progressive vision of art.

The last avant-garde in painting – the art world’s latest enthusiasm with the medium, be it the trans-avant-garde in Italy, *Figuration Libre* in France, German Neo-Expressionism or New York painting of the ‘80s, to name but a few dates back to the early ‘80s, and was quickly dismissed as reactionary or commercial by art critics such as those at the influential *October*<sup>7</sup> journal. But was this enough to stop painting, or rather stop painters from making it? And should painting be considered impervious to the post-conceptual and performative turns of the 90s, right up to the end of the 2000s?

For my part, I think painting is interesting precisely because of its versatility, enabling it to rise above criticism and its offside position, as if this exclusion didn’t concern it. Because painting is neither white nor black,

4 Painting as an obsolete medium in Dadaism; painting as a social project in Constructivism, Bauhaus and De Stijl; painting as an emancipation from the frame in Allan Kaprow’s performances or Hélio Oiticica’s environments...

5 Rob Colvin, « Everybody Likes “Like Art” », in *Hyperallergic*, March 1<sup>st</sup> 2017.

6 Alex Greenberger, « First There Was Zombie Formalism – Now There’s Zombie Figuration », in *ARTnews*, July 20<sup>th</sup> 2020 and Dean Kissick, « The Rise of Bad Figurative Painting », in *The Spectator*, July 30<sup>th</sup> 2021.

7 Douglas Crimp, « The End of Painting » and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, « Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting » in *October*, Vol. 16, Art World Follies, Spring 1981.

but made up of multiple realities, as confusing as they are contradictory. “The truth of painting”, to paraphrase Paul Cézanne<sup>8</sup>, is that it does not and cannot die. It is this very complexity that renders all talk of its supposed death irrelevant.

If the conceptual artists of the 60s and 70s, following in Marcel Duchamp’s footsteps, proposed art forms without object<sup>9</sup> or agreed their art could be made by someone else<sup>10</sup> – an aberration from the traditional point of view on art – we subsequently notice that painters began to think like conceptual artists, and not just painters (Gerard Richter, Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool, Heimo Zobernig, Sylvie Fanchon or Peter Halley. Not to be confused with conceptual artists such as Robert Barry or Mel Bochner, who began to make paintings, perhaps to better sell their work, which unfortunately turned out to be very disappointing works). They attached as much importance to the subjectivity of the gesture as to the need to formalize a critical discourse in painting, on art and its milieu, on its porosity with the world. From the late 70s onward, Martin Kippenberger worked extensively on himself and the artist’s place in the art world, reflecting on the context of production in an economy indexed to that of the financial markets, and on the reality of the artist as art worker, somewhere between clown and bad boy. His influential reflections have developed in the work of artists such as Michael Krebber, Jutta Koether, Michel Majerus, Cosima Von Bonin, Amy Sillman, Fabienne Audéoud and Merlin Carpenter. In this respect, art critic David Joselit was one of the few to renew the discourse on painting at the end of the 2000s in his text “Painting Beside Itself”<sup>11</sup>. In it, the author highlights the need for painters to adapt their pictorial creation to the ambient art system, be it the social interactions within their professional world, their relationship to the context (the gallery, the location of the museum, gentrification), the weight of history, or even their economy. In some cases, this was an extension of the methods of institutional criticism, but this time through the medium of painting. Through these strategies, painting was able to break out of its formal, self-centered, essentialist and autonomous framework, to define itself as part of an undeniable general context, with which it had to interact, make visible, or against which it had to resist and defend itself. It was thus able to open up to the outside world, without rejecting its historical particularities: not an end in itself, but a starting point to which it is always possible to return.

Despite this persistence (more discreet, but very much present) from the 90s to the present day, there is currently a worrying revengeful attitude in France about an alleged 30-year rejection of painting, which is difficult to endorse. We’ve seen exhibitions<sup>12</sup> defending painting in a reactionary, even bellicose manner, as if it were necessarily a medium with no connection to

8 « I owe you the truth in painting and I shall tell it to you », excerpt from a *Letter of October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1905*, from Paul Cézanne to Emile Bernard.

9 Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler declared in 1969 that « The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more ».

10 In 1968, artist Lawrence Wiener said of his art that: 1) The artist may construct the piece. 2) The piece may be fabricated. 3) The piece need not be built.

11 David Joselit, « Painting Beside Itself » in *October*, Vol.130, MIT Press, Fall 2009.

12 *Les Apparences*, CAC – À cent mètres du monde, Perpignan (2021); *Immortelle*, MOCO, Montpellier (2023); *Le jour des peintres. 80 peintres contemporains de la scène française à la rencontre des visiteurs*, Musée d’Orsay, Paris (2024)

conceptual art, as if it possessed an immutable character, functioning only for itself, the sole embodiment of pure representation and eternal beauty. Yet painting has also digested conceptual art, and has sometimes appropriated it to become, for some artists, post-conceptual. In an age of transdisciplinary artistic approaches, painting cannot occupy this exclusive place at the center of the *zeitgeist* or *Kunstwollen*. It has not been abandoned or rejected by institutions or curators; it has simply had to make way for other media, other experiments requiring development on the part of artists. Perhaps we can assume that painting found itself somewhat limited, and therefore unsuited to what certain artists wished to express in a specific context. For such is the nature of art, to move from one taste to another, from one trend to another, from one way of expressing oneself to another. It is therefore strange to take offence at the fact that painting hasn't always had pride of place in art, or among those whose mission is to show it, in recent decades<sup>13</sup>. I'm tempted to point out, perhaps a little abruptly, that there's more to art than painting – and it's just as well! It's important to allow oneself the possibility of composing with something other than paint. There are also those who think "painting", while doing something else...

The truth is, we're faced with a problem of categorization, as if painting had to be a category: painting on the one hand, sculpture on the other, conceptual art, performance art on the other, and so on. But what about painting as a state of mind? Duchamp said it best: "In other words, I just took oil paint off the canvas and put it into my life instead. I used it to paint myself, breathing and jumping. I'm my own living readymade, so to speak"<sup>14</sup>. Once and for all, we need to accept that painting, following the evolution of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, needs to come down from its pedestal as the only serious art form. It could then stop struggling in an illusory struggle, since it has never been endangered. Painting is not art; it belongs to art in the same way as other mediums. Let's try to overcome this misunderstanding of conceptual art, based on an erroneous reading of Duchamp, so as not to make a big deal of painting's periodic reflux in the field of art.

The result of this highly contagious state of mind is the persistence of a belief among the majority of our contemporaries that good art is a well-made painting (or sculpture, for that matter). This assent has the effect of maintaining a dramatic gap between these contemporaries and the polymorphous creation of today's art – contemporaries who, as a result, don't understand the creation of their time, and worse still, feel rejected by it!<sup>15</sup>

In my opinion, the point is not to assert once again that painting is an obsolete, retrograde medium, or to say that it is, on the contrary, the eternal medium, the essence of art, and so on. These antinomic visions, which have imposed themselves on us for far too long, are detrimental to painting and lock it into a dead-end discourse, while we must recognize that, at the same time, this type

13 « Pendant trente ans, on a méprisé les peintres », interview between Thomas Lévy-Lasne and Violaine de Montclos, *Le Point* online, September 8<sup>th</sup> 2024.

14 *Marcel Duchamp. La peinture, même*, exhibition catalogue. Centre Pompidou – Musée national d'art moderne, September 24<sup>th</sup> 2014 – January 5<sup>th</sup> 2015, Paris, p. 37.

15 See also, Estelle Zhong Mengual and Baptiste Morizot, *Esthétique de la rencontre: L'énigme de l'art contemporain*, Le Seuil, 2018.

of art carries on and endures. It seems more interesting to us to ask how and why painting manages to evolve or remain, despite all the trouble it takes to assert oneself as a painter, other than for commercial reasons. If painting remains, it's perhaps because it allows things to happen and be said that wouldn't otherwise have the same consistency. Moreover, the socio-cultural characteristics of each era urgently require pictorial representation of their reality, whether abstract or figurative. Painting should neither be seen through the prism of opportunism nor that of defiance, but as a form of malleability in relation to the plasticity and fluidity of the passage of time.

As a circulating object, painting is inevitably subject to the laws of the capitalist regime, no matter what anyone says. Any artist claiming otherwise would be a fraud. But artists who paint in such a context cannot automatically be considered as sell-outs. Many remain honest and lucid about their production conditions, yet refuse to stop painting on the pretext that they are practising a medium that is economically and politically doomed in advance. Of course, they work for a living and a certain recognition (like everyone else in their own field), but they also work for the pleasure of making art, of sharing intellectually and visually a free language.

Lately, as the discourse of minorities is finally gaining the visibility and spotlight it deserves, (figurative) painting is regaining legitimacy in that it is restoring a face and a voice to invisibilized subjects such as those from the LGBTQIA+ and African or Afro-descendant<sup>16</sup> communities. And artists from these communities are becoming the new champions of the art market, while at the same time asserting their claim to a political art that carries hitherto minoritized voices. Painting that expresses strong political demands allows ostracized or non-Western artists to participate in art history and inspire the artists of tomorrow, while selling for thousands of dollars.

In the early '80s, when painting was caught in a critical vice between those who considered it anti-progressive and the retrograde vision of others who glorified its return, artist Thomas Lawson reminded us in his text "Last Exit: Painting" that "while there may be no point in continuing to make certain kinds of art, art as a mode of cultural discourse has not yet been rendered completely irrelevant". For him, "it is painting itself, that last refuge of the mythology of individuality, which can be seized to deconstruct the illusions of the present. For since painting is intimately concerned with illusion, what better vehicle for subversion?" And finally, "the discursive nature of painting is persuasively useful, due to its characteristic of being a never ending web of representations"<sup>17</sup>. Its equivocal, illusionist nature would make it one of the best means of subversion in art, in the face of the late capitalist regime's stifling of the radical artists.

15 Voir à ce sujet, Estelle Zhong Mengual et Baptiste Morizot, *Esthétique de la rencontre: L'énigme de l'art contemporain*, Le Seuil, 2018.

16 John-Baptiste Oduor, « The Politics of Black Figurative Art Today » in *Frieze*, Issue 240, January-February 2024; Ayodeji Rotinwa, « The Ordinary is Radical for the Youth of Lagos: Emerging Artists Painting Realistic, Everyday Black Life » in *La Belle revue*, n°11, ed. In extenso, Clermont-Ferrand, 2021; Emily Watlington, « New Talent: 6 Queer Figurative Painters Reimagining Intimacy », in *ARTnews* online, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2021.

17 Thomas Lawson, « Last Exit: Painting » in *Artforum*, October 1981.

Faced with the revengeful attitude in favor of a certain “French painting”, another is to simply not give a damn, saying to oneself that in painting, only pleasure counts, no matter how much attention one pays to it, or whatever the turn of art in today’s society, which even worse than the cynicism of the ‘80s, leads to a floating out of time, where nothing would matter, everything being equal in itself. Having long lost interest in painting, but unable to remain indifferent to its power of attraction among artists of my generation, I’m rather inclined, in these times of dark, predatory capitalism, to join Thomas Lawson on the tortuous and fraught path he proposed for this type of art. For if painting remains, persists and navigates among the most redhibitory critics, its discursive dimension must indeed have a genuine emancipatory potential<sup>18</sup>. It’s up to each artist to find the right way to use it.

Benoît Lamy de La Chapelle  
*Translated by the author*

<sup>18</sup> It’s worth noting that Raoul Haussman, an influential member of the International Dada movement, rejected this “conventional” medium in favor of a more progressive artistic language, but returned to painting in the late ‘50s. See the exhibition *Raoul Haussman – Peintre* at the Musée d’art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne – Château de Rochechouart (2024).